

Career Advancement Barriers in Malaysian Federal Public Service

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Abstract. This paper aims to identify subjective discrimination and barriers to career advancement in Malaysian federal public service especially for Muslim women. From purposive sampling technique on eight federal ministries, the rate of response is 43 percent. Glass wall and subjective discrimination are perceived to exist in these agencies as the respondents agreed that gender is the reason to their current placement and the higher standard for promotion. Personality and family factors are the major barriers of career advancement. Despite of these barriers, they are willing to devote their time to advance their career as majority of them have not yet applied for promotion and believe they have good prospect in it. Thus, leaving the organization is the last thing that they would do.

Keywords: women, public service, federal agencies, Muslim, Malaysia

1. Introduction

There are so many barriers to career advancement especially faced by Muslim women. Prior research has suggested that education, mobility, time devoted to job each week, leaves of absence, work location and having a mentor are important factors in career advancement. Research also suggested that marriage and children adversely affect women's career advancement (Naff, 1994).

Women face discrimination in progressing to the top management post. Discrimination could be categorized into two: i) is objective discrimination and, ii) is subjective discrimination. Objective discrimination is the exact number of discrimination cases in workplaces whereas subjective discrimination is the discrimination as perceived by the women. Factors that contribute to subjective discrimination are experiences (being turned down in promotion), personal attributes (race, national origin, education, marital and parental status), organizational factors (gender composition of work group) and work habits (mentor, amount of time devotion on work). Individuals who perceive discrimination would tend to have lower morale and perhaps less productive (Hopkins, 1980). Thus, they would not apply for promotion and leave the organization (Naff, 1995).

Considering the fact that there are some adverse effects of subjective discrimination, thus; the purpose of this study is to examine the subject matter as perceived by the Muslim women in Malaysian federal public service. This is due to federal public service is one of the largest employers in Malaysia. Furthermore, Islam is the national religion and Muslims comprise majority which is to date 60 percent of the population.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Women in Public Service

Generally, women in the public service were found to be over presented in redistributive agencies like welfare, health, housing, community and veteran affairs, labor and employment security, revenue and education compared to regulatory and distributive agencies (Kim, 2002). This workplace segregation could be due to their motherly nature and physically weaker than men.

2.2. Barriers to Career Advancement

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According to Newman (1994), there are three types of barrier variables: human capital, socio-psychological and systemic barriers. The author explained that human capital barriers are identified as insufficient education, domestic constraints, limited financial resources and insufficient experience. Meanwhile, social psychological barriers include sex-role stereotypes/role prejudice, negative perception of women's capacity for managing, questionable motivation and limiting self concepts. Finally, systemic barriers manifest themselves as sex segregation in the labour force, differential career ladder opportunities, sex segregation of domestic labour, limited access to professional training, limited access to informal network, lack of mentors, lack of power, sexual harassment, perceived lack of compatibility and lack of female role models.

Prejudice from male is quite prevalent in any organizations. (Omair, 2010). Concurring to this, Tlaiss and Kauser (2010) indicated that men find it difficult to accept female managers as equals. This has led to other problems such as lack of training, lack of performance appraisal, lower salaries and lack of promotion for women.

Bergmann (1986:114) contended that a "segregation code" prohibits mixing the sexes as equals and reserves upper-level jobs for men. Public agencies and federal-contract holders tend to be less sex segregated than the private sector and non-contractors. Newman (1983) identified two broad categories of labour-market segregation which are: i) horizontal segregation, when different types of work are allocated to men and women (horizontal segregation broadly corresponds to occupational segregation); and ii) vertical segregation, when men and women both participate in various fields of work but women are disproportionately concentrated in the lower grades and men in the higher. This term is also recognized as the glass wall metaphor by Kerr, Miller and Reid (2002) that refers to occupational segregation attributed to barriers that restrict women's access to certain types of jobs (or agencies) or to factors that concentrate women within certain types of jobs (or agencies). Daley (1998) highlighted that glass wall jobs shove individuals into secondary professional career paths that do not possess the potential for advancement into upper management slots.

The jobs the men hold tend to be assigned higher prestige than the jobs the women hold within the same job categories. This is due to men are providers and women are carers (Hojgaard, 2002). Women tend to view their work as secondary to their family livelihoods when compared with men (Vertz, 1985). There are some supportable and complex reasons for women's absence from senior management such as taking their time out for raising children, lack of mobility and social problems (Brenner, Tomkiewicz & Schein, 1989). Even when a working woman had domestic assistance, she is still held responsible for managing her family. If her child or husband is ill, she is expected to interrupt her work in order to ensure that their needs are met. If she fails to do so, society tends to judge her as bad wife or mother (Corner, 1997). Human capital and exchange theories suggest that married person will be less likely to move for his or her own career advancement. Married women with considerably lower incomes than their husbands should be especially unlikely to move (Newman, 1993).

The U.S. Department of Labour defined the glass ceiling as *"those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization"* (1991: 1). Other author like Mani (1997) defined glass ceiling as an invisible barrier based on attitudinal or organizational bias which prevents qualified individuals from advancing to managerial positions. Oijala (1987) said that the idea was first introduced in the Wall Street Journal that women climbing the corporate ladder hit their heads against an invisible glass ceiling when trying to scale past the middle management level.

Other factors that hinder women from the top are due to their lack of skills such as people and communication skills. They also face problems in getting the right people around them and getting the support of the right people (Olson & Pringle, 2004). Other factor is the women's low confidence. They are given the titles but not the power of authority e.g. Pakistan. In short, they are not as authoritarian as men (Oplatka, 2006).

2.3. Women in Malaysian Public Service

According to Shahrizat (NST, 2011), women at the decision making level (JUSA & above) have increased to 32.3 percent. There are few top Muslim women managers in Malaysia like Zety Akhtar Aziz as the National Bank Governor, Nooryah Md. Anvar as the Chief Royal Traffic Malaysia, Siti Norma Yaacob as the Chief Judge Malaysia and Prof. Dr. Sharifah Habsah as the Vice-Chancellor of the National University of Malaysia (Suhid & Ahmad, 2010).

2.4. Muslim Women as Managers

Islam emphasizes on women’s right to practice their religion as equal believers as well as their rights of access to education, employment, entrepreneurship and political participation (APMM, 2009). In short, Islam prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender (Syed & Ali, 2010). Thus, Muslim women are permissible to earn their own income and allowable to work provided that they seek permission from their husbands (Nooh, 2006).

3. Research Methodology

Federal public service in Malaysia was identified as the population of the study. The data from the ministries and federal agencies is collected by using purposive sampling technique in order to collect sufficient data for descriptive analysis. The respondents were selected based on two factors which are the nature of the ministries as to be masculine (e.g. ministry of foreign affairs) and Muslim women in top management and professional and managerial posts.

Based on the literature review, a questionnaire was developed which later was tested on five female public managers. From their feedback, the questionnaire was edited. The final questionnaire was sent to 241 respondents from eight federal ministries.

4. Findings

105 completed questionnaires were returned but only 103 are useable. This amounted to 43 percent of rate of response. Majority of the women are Malay (97.1%) in between 26-35 years old (55%), married (68%), possess a bachelor degree for their highest level of education (68.9%) and earn RM2000-3000 for their basic salary. They have been in their current position i.e. professional and managerial post-grade 41 (91.3%) from 1 to 5 years (95%).

Majority of them have only one child (15.5%). Their parents had worked in public sector as they do. Majority of them spent 10 hours at work per day (47.6%). They sometimes bring work back home (61.4%). They are not the primary provider of the family (66%). Thus, they put family as the first priority (63.1%) while career as the last (41.7%). This shows that these women are very committed with their work even though it is not their priority.

Majority of them were satisfied with their current positions (63.1%), salary grade positions (62.1%), and power (64.1%). Thus, they have not applied for promotion (79.6%).

They agree that gender has been a factor in their placement in the organizations (38.8%). Furthermore, in terms of promotion, the standards seem to be higher for them (35.9%). Moreover, those who got promotion were due to the people that they know (32%). Please refer to Table 2 for the details.

Table 2: Negative Attitudes on Career Advancement

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender has been a factor in placement	40	38.8
Standards are higher for women	37	35.9
Promotion is due to network	33	32

Majority of them agree that there are 16 barriers that generally hinder women from promotion which are personality (61.2%), preference for family (49.5%), lack of confidence (47.6%), lack of leadership charisma (47.6%), insufficient experience (46.6%), society expectation (44.7%), lack of informal network

(44.7%), geographical relocation (40.8%), limited access to professional training (36.9%), quota (36.9%), low self esteem (36.9%), competitive examination (35.9%), lack of power (35.9%), perceived lack of compatibility (35.9%), no mentoring system (35%) and difficulty in finding a husband (33%). Please refer to Table 3 for the details.

Table 3: Career Advancement Barriers

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Personality	63	61.2
Preference For Family	51	49.5
Lack of Confidence	49	47.6
Lack of Leadership Charisma	49	47.6
Insufficient Experience	48	46.6
Society Expectation	46	44.7
Lack of Informal Network	46	44.7
Geographical Relocation	42	40.8
Limited Access to Professional Training	38	36.9
Quota	38	36.9
Low Self Esteem	38	36.9
Competitive Examination	37	35.9
Lack of Power	37	35.9
Perceived Lack of Compatibility	37	35.9
No Mentoring System	36	35
Difficulty in Finding Husband	34	33

50.5 percent of the respondents believe that they have good prospect in terms of promotion in their departments. Thus, they are willing to devote much of their time for career advancement (61.2%) whereby 47.6 percent of them will apply promotion for the next 3 to 5 years. However, if they are unsuccessful, they will adjust their career aspiration (46.6%) and only 4.9 percent of them are willing to leave the organizations. Please refer to Table 4 for further details.

Table 4: Future Plans

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Devote time to advance career	63	61.2
Apply promotion next 3-5 years	49	47.6
Adjust career aspiration	48	46.6
Leave the organization	5	4.9

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The respondents perceived that the standards set for women for the promotion are especially higher for them compared to men and they have been placed in their present positions due to their gender and not because of their qualifications and capabilities. Furthermore, they found that majority women that had been promoted were due to the people that they know. Thus, this shows that there is some subjective discrimination in their organizations. In short, systemic barrier is prevalent in these organizations.

Sixteen barriers have been identified by the respondents which are personality, preference for family, lack of confidence, lack of leadership charisma, insufficient experience, society expectation, lack of informal network, geographical relocation, limited access to professional training, quota, low self esteem, competitive examination, lack of power, perceived lack of compatibility, no mentoring system and difficulty in finding husband. Personality and preference over family factors top the list of these barriers. Since majority of them have not applied for promotion and they believe that they have good prospect, they are willing to devote their time for their career advancement. However, if they are unsuccessful, they are willing to adjust their career aspiration and only a small number of them plan to leave the organizations.

6. Acknowledgements

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